

Wicca's Shady Claims!

Historians and Scholars Produce New Picture of Witches and Witch Hunts, but Questions Remain

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By Peter Steinfels

It is the season of witches - cute little costumed ones crying "trick or treat" and full-grown adult ones laying claim to Halloween and recounting tales of medieval and early modern persecution.

In a search for historical roots and moral legitimacy, some feminists and many adherents of neopagan or goddess-centered religious movements like Wicca have elaborated a founding mythology in which witches and witch hunts have a central role. Witches, they claim, were folk healers, spiritual guides and the underground survivors of a pre-Christian matriarchal cult. By the hundreds of thousands, even the millions, they were the victims of a ruthless campaign that church authorities waged throughout the Middle Ages and early modern centuries to stamp out this rival, pagan religion.

Robin Briggs, an Oxford historian, is only one of many contemporary scholars rejecting this account. What unites most "common assumptions" about witches, witchcraft and witch hunts, Mr. Briggs writes in "Witches and Neighbors: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft" (Viking Penguin, 1996), is "one very marked feature," namely "that they are hopelessly wrong."

Over the last two decades or so, he and other historians, along with scholars in anthropology and psychology, have produced quite a different picture, although one leaving many questions unanswered.

Were the Middle Ages the prime period of burning witches, and church authorities the prime persecutors? That is an impression inherited from 19th-century Romantic and nationalist writers like the German folklorist Jacob Grimm and the French historian Jules Michelet.

Filtering dubious sources, including in Michelet's case some that had actually been forged, through their political agendas, they portrayed witches as personifications of popular resistance to political and religious authorities.

In fact, medieval Christianity was divided about witchcraft. Belief in magical or supernatural powers that could be manipulated for either good or evil was ubiquitous then, as it has been throughout human history and still is in many cultures. But medieval Europe was torn between that belief and theological arguments that such powers were illusory.

Thus witches were persecuted in the Middle Ages, as they were in other periods, including pre-Christian antiquity; and they were sometimes executed. Persecution, however, was relatively spotty, and penalties were often lenient. Only toward the end of the Middle Ages and especially in the century after the Reformation (1550-1650) did Europe experience eruptions of systematic witch hunting.

Yet even to speak of "Europe" is misleading. Ireland, for example, saw scarcely any executions. Nor did Portugal, and neither - apart from local outbreaks in the Basque region - did Spain. Paradoxically, one reason for the restraint in the latter two countries was the Inquisition. In the course of its preoccupation with other scapegoats like Jews and Muslims, it had developed rules of evidence that meant most accusations and even confessions of witchcraft were dismissed as delusions.

The multitude of German-speaking states and territories took the most victims, both in absolute numbers and percentages of population. Also high ranking were Switzerland, the Low Countries under Spanish rule (by secular authorities rather than the Inquisition), Bohemia, Poland, Scotland and Scandinavia.

As this list shows, persecution was the work of both Catholics and Protestants. In fact, panics about witchcraft often broke out in areas of high tension between them.

Were witch hunts the work of secular and religious authorities repressing grass-roots religious dissent? In some instances, yes. But the more common pattern was the opposite. Witch crazes were grass-roots phenomena that broke out more readily where the authorities were weak.

About 80 percent of the victims of these witch hunts were women, especially the poor, the aged and the widowed. Women, it should be noted, were also prominent among the accusers and the witnesses; sometimes trials revealed deadly competition: one midwife or woman convinced of her spiritual powers trying to do in a rival practitioner.

But clearly, patriarchy and misogyny were major factors. Yet patriarchy and misogyny were no less present in areas where witch crazes never occurred; and in areas like Scandinavia, the Balkans, the Baltic countries and Russia, high percentages of the accused were men.

"Accused witches were young, old, male, female, child, adult, poor, rich," writes Diarmaid MacCulloch in "The Reformation," a comprehensive history published by Penguin last year. One can assume, of course, that the rich, the male and the female with a husband surely had much better chances of defending themselves.

And, finally, how many victims were there? "For witchcraft and sorcery between 1400 and 1800, all in all, we estimate something like 50,000 legal death penalties," writes Wolfgang Behringer in "Witches and Witch-Hunts" (Polity, 2004). He estimates that perhaps twice as many received other penalties, "like banishment, fines or church penance."

Other recent estimates range from 40,000 to 100,000 executions over those early modern centuries. These remain appalling numbers, even when put in the context of the far greater numbers killed in religious wars and the fact that resort to capital punishment was at one of its high points in European history.

No one should underestimate the cruelty these numbers represent. "Witchfinders," Malcolm Gaskill's full-blooded account, just published by Harvard University Press, of the most notorious witch hunt in English history, makes that clear in engrossing detail.

But contemporary historians bridle at the huge numbers that have become part of the witch hunt mythology-and the implicit or explicit comparisons to the Nazi campaign of genocide. Professor Behringer traced the estimate of nine million victims back to wild projections made by an 18th-century anticlerical from 20 files of witch trials. The figure worked its way into 19th-century texts, was taken up by Protestant polemicists during the anti-Catholic Kulturkampf in Germany, then adopted by the early 20th-century German neopagan movement and, eventually, by anti-Christian Nazi propagandists.

In the United States, the nine million figure appeared in the 1978 book "Gyn/Ecology" by the influential feminist theoretician Mary Daly, who picked it up from a 19th-century American feminist, Matilda Gage.

Do such unfounded myths do anyone any good? Certainly many feminists, including some identifying themselves as neopagans, agree with contemporary historians about the answer: No.

Wicca's **UN**true History

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